

## Learning About Learning

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### Assessment for learning - Dylan Wiliam

Paul Black and I have been working on formative assessments since about 1984. We had been working on a variety of research projects: I was involved in mathematics and he was working in science education. And we were exploring the use of assessment to help improve students learning rather than just to measure it. What we found was that... the evidence was that if teachers did these formative assessment practices consistently then students achievement would rise substantially. There are different ways of describing this: one is to say that actually Scotland or England would go to number 5 in the world league tables if they could achieve that. Another way to think about it is when teachers do a formative assessment effectively students learn at double the rate that they do without it. So you are really talking about achieving 1 year's learning within 6 months through the use of formative assessment.

One of the things I have realised is that most teachers perhaps probably all teachers learn most they know about teaching before their 18th birthday. We learn about teaching by being students. Even if you go to a great teacher education programme at a college you're only there for 4 years and you have been in a classroom for 13. So when the pressure is on and you are reacting in the classroom - you are relying on the scripts, the routines that you've learned of about how classrooms work when you were a student. I often say teachers actually know everything I tell them. The research on 'wait time' we showed for example that teachers typically wait for less than a second to give students a chance to answer a question they've asked before weakening it or asking somebody else. We pointed teachers to this research that showed that really 3 seconds to 5 seconds actually increased level of dialogue in the classroom increased the thoughtfulness of students and did in fact improve student achievement.

What was interesting was most teachers already knew this. What they did not do is do it in their own teaching. One of the things that we became very aware of is that getting clear about what needs to happen is the easy part of the problem - the hard part of the problem is helping teachers to do this in their own classrooms. In some sense we have room more to learn from Weight Watchers than we do from education research because we are trying to change habits. The reason the teachers find it so difficult to change what they do in the classroom is because they have a lot invested in the routines that get them through the lesson. Teachers are very practiced at stitching together these mini episodes that make a lesson a good lesson. It's very hard to change that: it's a bit like asking a golfer to change their swing in the middle of a tournament. You asking teachers to change what has been successful for them in order to be more successful - it's very hard to do. The research has very clearly... that if you are very serious about raising student achievement they are no quick fixes. You aren't going to do it by changing class size, by changing school structures - it's about what happens day in, day out in the classroom that makes a big difference.